

August 25, 2019

Lesson 13: Marriage: A Covenant of Mutual Love

Scripture: Ephesians 5:21-6:4

Context:

Our lesson closes with a focus on marriage as a covenant of mutual love. The scripture comes from Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus. The verses come from chapter five, which gives instruction about the covenant of marriage in comparison to the relationship between Christ and the church.

The book of Ephesians is a book on ecclesiology, or an explanation of how the church should function. In the section before the one read today, there is a focus on proper worship and how that should happen. The writer moves from discussing how corporate worship should pan out to the domestic relationships of those who worship.

There is debate on whether this passage is actually about marriage or if it is taking the secular Roman cultural definition of marriage to explain how the church should understand its identity in relation to Christ. A helpful place to begin is to look at previous revelations from Paul about marriage and the church. In First Corinthians, Paul's teaching on marriage indicates that his preference is for celibacy, but that it is not a gift intended for all people.¹ Paul realizes that the sexual urge is strong and that a marriage can offer that legitimate fulfillment.

As such, this passage can be read as a helpful explanation for ecclesial identity yet also offers a model to understand some of the tenets that come in a healthy marriage. There is a model of covenant for both parties to consider before they make vows with each other. There are rules for all to consider when coming into such a union.

The first thing to consider is that domination is not a main part of the marriage covenant. Neither sex is to dominate the relationship and the word submit does not carry a call to blind obedience or docile servility.² There is to be voluntary consent and agreement in which both parties understand that covenant is a two way street. One cannot force another to do something and use their genitalia as the determining factor in issues of life together.

Instead, the marriage covenant is to be based on two individuals coming together, both made in God's image. What should guide this covenant is the primacy of love when both parties understand terms of self-surrender, sacrifice, and holy design.³ The allusion of relationship between Christ and the church to the marriage between man and woman reminds us that both are to be built on love and respect.

An important note about the focus on the male's roles in this household code may be due to some of the gnostic teachings in the ancient world. There were some Christians who may have seen the body as sinful and called for an ascetic way of life, perhaps even

¹ Ralph P. Martin. "Ephesian, Colossian, and Philemon," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY, 1991), 70.

² *Ibid.*, 69.

³ *Ibid.*, 71.

shaming men for their sexual urges.⁴ Thus, Paul nips in the bud any concern that the body is an evil or disgusting thing. All are made in the image of God; body, mind, and spirit. The covenant of marriage is a safe place for those sexual urges to be fulfilled.

Application

Allusions and metaphors can be powerful ways of helping humans understand a concept. They can help us see the importance as words give us a picture of what things are to look like. The imaginative juices can help us understand the significance of the ordinary as extraordinary.

That is the case with this description of the marriage covenant. We are given the image of Christ and the church as an example for how a marriage covenant should function. It is to be a beautiful picture of love and reverence. Jesus showed the church how to love and gave his life. In return the church lives out the example Jesus gave and shares that with the world.

Yet this allusion also reminds us not to take things too far and abuse them. Nowhere in this passage does it suggest that women are inferior to men or that men hold a higher premium than women. Both parties have made the covenant and both are to contribute to building up each other. If anything, we read in the scripture that the man and woman are yoked to Christ and that he is the one who presides over the marriage. He leads them to love and serve each other.

This passage reminds us that marriage is a beautiful thing. It does not mean that everyone is to be married or that it is a sacrament and that if you are not in one, you have somehow missed out on your walk with Christ. But it is something in which others may experience the love of God from another human being.

When talking about marriage and covenant, I think we are reminded that marriage involves an element of work. It is not just about having someone so that you aren't lonely or so that you can have babies and "fit in" with the world around you. Marriage is not about finding someone to "make you happy," as if a person can fulfill your every need and desire. Marriage is definitely not about "fixing someone" and making all their problems go away.

A marriage is about two individuals wanting to share life together who have the deepest love and respect for one another. There is a mutual affection that is shared and a desire to grow in relationship with one another. Yet in this marriage, there is a covenant to love and support each other even when things are not the best. There is a vow made to understand each other. The promise to respect each other is a big one that takes time and vulnerability.

The healthiest marriages are those in which the couple understands they are a team. One is not more important than the other and the decisions are made by discussion and listening to each other. Both understand that there are compromises to be made and also times for there to be boundaries. Both people in the marriage realize that they cannot depend on their spouse for their self-fulfillment or happiness. They understand that they have to bring something to the marriage with their own sense of self.

If you are married, think about the way you treat your partner and if there is mutual respect and concern. If you are single and are interested in dating, think about

⁴ Ibid., 72.

your own values and the qualities you consider important in a relationship. If you are single and not called to marriage, think about the ways that you can offer support to your married friends and find relationships where you can find support and the love of God. Regardless of marital status, the marriage covenant can demonstrate to us how we see ourselves in relationships with others. Hopefully, we can find those relationships that are healthy where mutual love and affection are shared and given.

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